**Byzantine Religion and Influence**

The official language of Byzantium at the time of its founding was Latin, the language of Rome; however its locals spoke Greek. The Code of Justinian was written in Latin. However, over time, Greek replaced Latin as the language of the government. Scholars no longer learned to read Latin, but rather drew inspiration from both the New Testament (originally written in Greek) and the philosophy and literature of classical Greece.

The large bureaucracy of Byzantium necessitated an efficient educational system to train government workers. It was in the educational system that the influence and legacy of Classical Greece, rather than Classical Rome, was most evident. Aristocrats often hired tutors for their children; however the workforce of the government normally came from a state organized school system that taught reading, writing and grammar, which were followed by classical Greek literature, philosophy, and medicine. Boys and girls were educated in the system.

Literacy was quite high in Byzantine society. Merchants, manufacturers, clergy, and military personnel had at least a primary education. There was also a school of higher learning at Constantinople which offered instruction in law, medicine and philosophy. It operated for the life of the Byzantine Empire, more than one thousand years.

Byzantine scholarship reflected its Greek roots. Scholars concentrated on the humanities: literature, history and philosophy, rather than natural sciences or medicine. They produced commentaries on Homer, Plato, and Aristotle; which were used as textbooks in schools along with classical works themselves. Those within the Empire who were educated considered themselves the heirs of classical Greece, and went to great lengths to preserve their legacy. Almost all the literary and philosophical works of classical Greece survive because they were preserved by the Empire.

**The Byzantine Church:** Byzantine Christianity was closely tied to the government, so much so that its emperors are often referred to as caesaropapist, supreme over both church and state. Constantine himself often intervened in Church matters; it was he who convened the Council of Nicaea in 325 which brought together many bishops and church leaders to consider the position of Arian Christians.

The Arians were followers of a priest from Alexandria named Arius who taught that Jesus had been a mortal man created by God rather than divine and co-equal with God. Many theologians argued to the contrary, teaching that Jesus was both God and man. Constantine supported the latter position, and attended sessions of the Council of Nicaea to lend his support, although at the time, he had not fully admitted to being Christian. Because of his presence, the council adopted the orthodox view, and Arianism was condemned as heresy.

The Byzantine church was treated by the Emperors as a department of the state. They appointed the Patriarch of Constantinople (the highest church office in Byzantium and counterpart to the Pope in Rome. Patriarchs, bishops and priests were instructed to deliver sermons which supported imperial policy and encouraged obedience to the government. This was a source of conflict that often led to protests when the views of the government were not those of the populace.

The most divisive policy adopted by the Byzantine Emperors was that of Iconoclasm. The Empire had a long tradition of producing icons—paintings of Jesus and other religious personages—many of which were magnificent works of art. They were considered useful as they inspired the popular imagination, and encouraged reverence for the figures depicted in the icons. The Emperor Leo III (r. 17 – 741) took issue with this as he considered the icons to violate the Second Commandment ("graven images.") In 726 C.E. he began the policy of iconoclasm, literally "breaking idols" by means of which religious images were destroyed and their use within the church prohibited. This caused protests and riots within the Empire as the laity were very fond of Icons. The debate raged for over a century; and iconoclasm was abandoned in 843 C.E.

Byzantine Christianity also reflected Greek influence. Although Christianity had originated from Jewish sources, theologians sought to harmonize it with cultural Greek traditions, such as philosophy. Their reasoning was that a religion with Christian revelation and Greek reason would be especially appealing. As a result, Byzantine philosophers began extensive examination of religious questions from a philosophical point of view. They used philosophy to understand the nature of Jesus and the extent to which he could be both God and man. The debate at times was exceptionally technical, but demonstrated their efforts to understand Christian doctrine in terms of classical philosophy. The patriarch of Constantinople maintained a school that provided instruction in advanced theology. Thus, Byzantium built its own cultural and religious traditions on Classical Greek foundations, rather than the Classical Latin foundations of the Western church. This difference would ultimately lead to a split of the two churches into the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches.

**Conflict between East and West:** With the onset of Islam in the Middle East and southwest Asia, the influence of church Patriarchs in Jerusalem, Alexandria and Antioch declined, leaving only Rome and Constantinople as the central authorities of the Church. Even so, tensions developed between the Eastern and Western Churches. Although there were political and social differences between the two areas (one was Latinized, the other Greek) the two divided most severely over theological matters, including the Iconoclastic movement. Western theologians considered Icons as perfectly appropriate aids to devotion and resented the fact that Byzantine scholars claimed otherwise. The Iconoclasts resented Roman efforts to restore Icons in Byzantium. Later disagreements over form of worship and the precise wording of theological teachings (relatively minor in themselves) caused more dissension.

Among the matters on which they disagreed: Eastern theologians objected to the fact that western priests shaved their beards and used unleavened bread for mass. Other differences were more theological, such as the precise relationship between God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

A further dividing issue was the extent of control exercised by Church authorities. Byzantine Patriarchs argued that that all Christian jurisdictions were autonomous; the Popes of Rome argued that they were the sole authority for all Christendom. The debate became so heated that in 1054, the patriarch in Constantinople and the Pope of Rome each excommunicated the other, and refused to recognize the other’s church as properly Christian. This was the "Great Schism of 1054." Although some efforts have been made at reconciliation, the two churches remain separate, with separate customs and rituals. The Eastern Church is the Greek Orthodox, and the Western the Roman Catholic.

**The Influence of Byzantium in Eastern Europe:** The Byzantines called themselves Romaioi, "Romans" and many traced their lineage back to Constantinople if not Constantine himself; but by 1000 C.E. Byzantium differed profoundly from the Mediterranean Society of Classical Rome. However, rather than an extensive cohesive Empire as Rome had established, Byzantium was increasingly defensive and hemmed in by the approach of Islam. The result was a period of decline for Byzantium. As its interests in the Mediterranean declined, its interests turned to the East, notably Russia. Byzantium became a substantial influence on the Slavic People such that its legacy survived the Empire itself. Following the fall of Constantinople, Moscow in Russia, the remaining center of the Orthodox Church, was known as the "third Rome."

Domestic problems as well as foreign pressure led to the decline of Byzantium. Domestic problems resulted from the success of the "theme" system, ironically. Those who governed the themes allied with aristocrats who held large tracts of land. Intermarriage between military and civilian aristocrats led to an elite class with tremendous military, political, social and economic power. Many resisted the policies of the imperial government and even mounted rebellions. Although the rebellions never succeeded, they did disrupt local economies severely. As the theme system grew in power and seized more land, the number of free peasants declined. The free peasants had been the source of recruits for the military; as a result of which military power declined. Additionally, the reduction in tax receipts caused fiscal problems for the Imperial government.

Foreign challenges were also mounting. The Normans, (commonly known as "Vikings" in Western Europe) had settled in Northern France, an area which became known as "Normandy." They soon were an independent power in southern Italy, and ultimately expelled Byzantine authorities from the Italian peninsula.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Normans and other western European people mounted a series of Crusades designed to recapture Jerusalem and drive the Muslims from the land where Jesus had lived. Many of the European knights who led the crusades carved out kingdoms for themselves in the heart of the Byzantine Empire. Ultimately, the Fourth Crusade (1202-1204) which was to be funded by Venetian merchants found itself funded only if the crusading knights agreed to collect money from Byzantium. The real reason was the Venetians wished to strengthen their own position in the lucrative Eastern trade. Disagreements between Crusaders and the rulers of Byzantium resulted in the Crusaders attacking and sacking Constantinople itself. Priceless treasures of both church and individuals were raided leaving the city in shambles. A Crusading knight had himself crowned Emperor of Byzantium, and occupied that position until 1261 when the Byzantines recaptured it; however the devastation was so devastating that the Empire never recovered its former strength. In November, 1451, the Ottoman Turks breached the walls and the city fell. Thus ended the Eastern Roman Empire, largely as the result of raids from Western "Christian" knights.

**Byzantium and the Slavs:** Byzantine traditions had deeply influenced political and cultural affairs of the Slavic people long before the Empire collapsed. Serbs and Croats had moved into the Balkan Peninsula while Justinian had the empire’s military forces occupied in the Western Mediterranean. Bulgars also established a kingdom in the Danube River valley.

Although original relations between the Byzantines and Bulgars were tense, the wealth and sophisticated diplomacy of Byzantium influenced Bulgarian society and politics. Byzantine emperors recognized the rights of Bulgarian kings and the ruling families often came to Constantinople for a formal education in Greek. Missionaries from the Empire often converted the Slavs to Orthodox Christianity. The most famous of these were two brothers from Thessaloniki, Greece, known as St. Cyril and St. Methodius. They conducted missions throughout the region, and devised an alphabet known as the Cyrillic alphabet for the Slavs. The Cyrillic alphabet, still in use in many parts of Eastern Europe, used Greek letters but represented the sounds of Slavic languages more precisely than the Greek. The creation of an alphabet enabled the Slavs to organize complex political structures and develop sophisticated traditions of thought and literature. It also stimulated conversation in the Orthodox Christian community. Missionaries translated scripture and church rituals into Slavonic and Cyrillic writing helped them explain Christian values and ideas in Slavic terms. Schools organized by missionaries ensure Slavs received religious instruction alongside their basic literacy. The result was a deeply held Christian influence on the cultural traditions of the Slavic people.

**Byzantine Influence on Russia:** Although many Russians are ethnically Slavic, the country itself and many of its people have Nordic origins. Vikings from Scandinavia settled in the area and set up major trading centers, primarily in the city of Kiev on the Dnieper River. The people of the area were known as the Rus, from the Scandinavian word for "Red," as most of them had red or blondish red hair. The name is still used by the Russian people as the official name of their country. A substantial portion of their trade was in slaves whom they captured from the Slavic peoples; in fact the word "slave" originates from "Slav." As Kiev grew wealthier and more important, Russian merchants visited Constantinople and became acquainted with Byzantine society. Russian princes expressed an interest in Orthodox Christianity and also sought alliances with the rulers in Constantinople.

Christianity became the official religion of Russia in 989 when Prince Vladimir of Kiev converted to Christianity and ordered his subjects to follow suit. Vladimir did not convert for virtuous reasons. He had expressed interest in several religions, including Islam and Roman Catholicism, but found Orthodox Christianity more to his taste. He himself could hardly be described as "Christian," as he often spoke of the virtues of drunkenness, and kept a harem with over eight hundred girls. However, with the adoption of Orthodox Christianity, Byzantine influence spread rapidly in the land. Cyrillic writing and Orthodox missions rose quickly. Teachers from Byzantium traveled to Russia and established schools and conducted services for Russian converts. For 200 years, Kiev was the conduit for the spread of Byzantine religious and cultural influence into Russia.

Byzantine Art and architecture was predominant in Kiev and other Russian cities. Icons encouraged piety, and religious images became a principal form of Russian artistic expression. The onion domes of early Russian churches were an attempt by Russian architects to imitate the domed structures of Constantinople using wood as the primary building material.

The Princes of Kiev exercised firm control over the Russian Orthodox Church. They drew inspiration from the Byzantines, and compiled a written legal code, and controlled trade with Byzantium and other areas. They gradually gained control of a large and wealthy society. By the eleventh century, Kiev had over four hundred churches and eight large marketplaces. By the early twelve century, the population was greater than thirty thousand. Sadly, a major fire in 1124 destroyed six hundred churches there.

As noted earlier, Moscow became known as the third Rome, after the first Rome fell to Germanic invaders and the second Rome, Constantinople, fell to the Turks. It became the cultural and religious beacon of Orthodox Christianity. During later centuries, Siberia was embraced by the Church, and missions were even established in Russian Alaska. Long after the collapse of the eastern Roman Empire, the Byzantine legacy lived on through the Russian Orthodox Church.